

# A Great Tradition

BEING MADE



Joe Nassif, Dr. Darrell Dean (Former WV Festival, "Mr. Chestnut"), and Lee Waybright (Chestnut Festival Park Committee).



Joe Nassif and TACF President Lisa Thomson

As a volunteer with The American Chestnut Foundation, Dr. Joseph Nassif has been able to combine two of his passions, the great American chestnut tree and his hometown of Rowlesburg, WV, to create a unique festival that's both fun and educational: the West Virginia Chestnut Festival.

Nassif's love of chestnut trees goes back to his father, also named Joseph Nassif.

"I witnessed first-hand the attempt to promote the planting of European and Asian chestnut seedlings," Nassif says. "My father was approached by the local bank president to assist in the effort of planting European and Asian chestnut trees in the community, since they had fond memories of when American chestnuts occupied the landscape. My father not only planted and grew chestnut trees in his spare time, but also distributed seedlings to others."

Nassif and his father also spent hundreds of hours outside, hunting, fishing, and hiking. “We always wanted to support the effort to support biodiversity,” he says. “You just can’t improve upon nature.”

Nassif joined TACF in the early 2000s after seeing an ad about the Foundation in the local newspaper. In 2006, he and his wife were living in Alexandria, VA and were involved during the formation of the Virginia chapter. Nassif’s wife joined the West Virginia chapter when it formed in 2009, while he stayed with Virginia. He still keeps up with both chapters.

Along with the American chestnut, Nassif is also deeply invested in his hometown of Rowlesburg, WV. Built on the main line of the Baltimore railroad, it was once a very important small town.

“It was like many little towns throughout the nation,” Nassif explains, “where economic activity has dwindled because of changes in how business is done and what is required to maintain a society.”

So Nassif and other members of the community formed the Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee (RRC) to promote tourism, economic growth, and cultural activities.

One idea was to launch a festival celebrating the American chestnut. “In 2007, we proposed that the chestnut world used to be centered in West Virginia,” Nassif says, “so why don’t we have a chestnut festival?”

There were no other chestnut festivals in any of the other 16 Appalachian states, so Nassif and the rest of the RRC were reinventing the wheel, so to speak.

“It was a challenge to develop, innovate, and create a plan for successfully hosting a one-day festival of interest to both the public-at-large and the scientific community.”

But the group pulled it off, and the annual West Virginia Chestnut Festival is now in its ninth year. It has become an annual mainstay for the town, not only by generating revenue, but also by bringing hundreds of people together to celebrate the chestnut.

The festival has evolved throughout the years by establishing and strengthening all of its original components including scientific presentations, TACF West Virginia chapter meetings, vendors, displays, a dinner gala, and overall, showcasing the town of Rowlesburg while serving delicious, roasted chestnuts.

In addition, each year the festival crowns a Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut, honoring a man and a woman who are important in the chestnut world. Last year, they also added a junior Chestnut Prince and Princess with students from the secondary school.



The 2015 WV Chestnut Royalty, Mr. and Mrs. Chestnut are Robert Sybolt and Carolyn Baumgardner Sybolt.

“We want to bring people together to meet chestnut aficionados, or as some called them – the rock stars of the chestnut world,” Nassif explains. “We’ve had a lot of very prominent researchers and promoters of the American chestnut at the festival.”

When he’s not helping to spearhead the West Virginia Chestnut Festival, Nassif teaches prosthodontics at the Howard University Dental School in Washington, DC. He also has a part time dental practice in Alexandria, VA.

“My students really keep me in my toes,” Nassif laughs. “I really enjoy interacting and making a contribution with them. I learn something new every day, it builds new brain cells!”

He began his career as a dental officer in the United States Air Force (USAF). He spent 25 years in the USAF Dental Corps, serving as a consultant in prosthodontics to the USAF Surgeon General. After retiring as a Colonel from the USAF, he taught at Georgetown University’s College of Dentistry for nine years before spending seven years in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, as a faculty member at the Dental College of King Saud University.

He enjoys spending time with his five children and their spouses, and his 14 grandchildren. He also golfs, swims, reads, gardens, every year he travels abroad with his wife, Beate. And, of course, every year, he looks forward to planning and attending the West Virginia Chestnut Festival.

Nassif makes sure to emphasize that this

is hardly a solo act. He counts on the help of his co-chairs and volunteers to make the festival possible year after year.

“Having a successful festival really involves a host of people, like our chestnut festival committee,” Nassif says. “I couldn’t do it without them.” He adds, “we’re always looking for fresh blood and people to help.”

For Nassif, the greatest accomplishment has been just realizing that they’ve pulled it off and started this great tradition of an annual chestnut festival.

“One of the proudest moments was in the very beginning for the very first festival,” he says, “not really having guidelines for how to put the festival together, the researchers, and the people involved in the chestnut world, they came to this first festival and it really brought tears to my eyes because I never thought that little old Rowlesburg could be the center of the chestnut world. It was very humbling to think that they thought this would be the start of something that really needed to be done.”

## WE NEED YOU!

The West Virginia Chestnut Festival always need volunteers! If you’re interested in volunteering or spreading the word for the next festival, on Sunday, October 9, 2016, please contact Joe Nassif at [njn3@msn.com](mailto:njn3@msn.com) or Shirley Hartley at [shirley.hartley@yahoo.com](mailto:shirley.hartley@yahoo.com).